

The Oregonian

Finding middle ground

Two congressmen strike a compromise on Mount Hood: Oregon should take what it can get in new wilderness

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It took three years of walking, talking and listening, but Congressmen Greg Walden and Earl Blumenauer have discovered something increasingly rare on the snowy flanks of Mount Hood: middle ground.

The two Oregon lawmakers have little in common except a shared district boundary that runs along the crest of Mount Hood. But Tuesday the rural Republican and urban Democrat together released a blueprint of a compromise plan to better protect the mountain and guide its development over the next several decades.

Their proposals include adding 75,000 acres to existing federally protected wilderness areas around Mount Hood. Most of the new wilderness would be in the Roaring River area and along the ridgeline of the Columbia Gorge.

The pair's proposals also include creative ideas to address Mount Hood's heavy recreation use and its stubborn transportation problems, while possibly enabling a complex land trade involving the Mt. Hood Meadows ski corporation.

The plan is solid, but it is built on a political compromise as delicate as a mountain wildflower. It is sorely tempting to demand more: more wilderness, more specific recreation proposals, more money for transportation improvements. But there is a risk of trampling this compromise.

We have consistently supported Oregon Sen. Ron Wyden's call for adding 180,000 acres of Mount Hood wilderness. A strong case can be made for granting wilderness protections to many areas not included in the Walden-Blumenauer compromise. But there is still an opportunity for a Senate version of a Mount Hood bill co-sponsored by Wyden and fellow Oregon Sen. Gordon Smith that could lead to greater wilderness protections.

Walden and Blumenauer say that wilderness advocates must take what they can get from this Congress, which is controlled by Republican leaders skeptical about environmental protections. Walden, as chairman of the House Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health, is in a position to push his compromise with Blumenauer through the House.

We'd like to see more wilderness, but we'll take what the Oregon delegation can get. The 75,000 acres would be the first new wilderness additions on Mount Hood in more than two decades. The recreation plans include a rebuilt tram to Timberline Lodge, the conversion of more forest roads to trails and a novel proposal to allow the Mount Hood National Forest to keep and reinvest permit fees and rents it collects.

Walden and Blumenauer still are willing to listen to ideas about their plan and about ways to protect and enhance Mount Hood. They will hold public meetings Saturday in Hood River and Portland to take comments on their proposals.

No one can accuse the two of rushing to the printer with their legislation. The two lawmakers have spent years building trust among stakeholders on Mount Hood, including local governments and Native American tribes. They trekked 41 miles together around the mountain this summer.

They are still on the right track. Walden and Blumenauer have produced not a political statement, or a campaign promise, but a plan with a realistic chance of congressional approval. It's not everything we'd like. But middle ground is like that.